Chapter 8
Constructing a Diaspora Anglophone Cameroonian Identity Online

Eric A. Anchimbe
University of Bayreuth, Germany

ABSTRACT
The chapter illustrates how Cameroonians living in the diaspora discursively construct their identity as anglophones, i.e., as coming from the anglophone part of the country (the North West and South West Regions) in online interactions. In order to do so, they draw from several sources: the colonial history and heritage of the country, the geographical origins of the anglophones, and the linguistic factor: the use of English. Emphasising certain traits that make them different and superior, the anglophones create an in-group almost on par with ethnicity. This in-group is recreated discursively in the data used here. The data were collected from the interactive feature of The Post Newspaper, online version. The chapter concludes that virtual identity construction follows similar strategies as real identities in non-virtual communities albeit differences imposed by the medium.

INTRODUCTION
Diaspora communication and identities are not at all new in current sociolinguistic research. Several significant findings have been made on how people in the diaspora from the same community or country tend to build in-groups through regular meetings, the use of language (dialects or sociolects), and other strategies (Anderson, 1983; Mühleisen, 2002). These are indeed real communities in which members attach faces to the names they call and the people they touch or see during meetings. But with the arrival of the internet, similar patterns of diaspora community building have emerged (see Donath, 1999; Hinrichs, 2006; Mair, 2003; Ponzanesi, 2001). In the virtual world, people have formed virtual communities representing the real diaspora communities and have engaged in identity construction activities and communication in pretty much the same ways – though with different specificities dictated by the medium – as in real communities. These online communities are,
however, different from the real communities in many aspects: identities keep changing together with the virtual nicknames adopted by members of the community; members feel safer and more distant in the different nicknames they adopt and hence often become more ‘daring’ in the extent of their criticism or propositions on certain topics; they find it easier to change positions as long as they can change their identities; and they may be in different locations but are still strongly linked by the internet. Although most of these things also happen in normal, real communities, the patterns are less direct and the threats to cordial co-existence tend to be reduced. An important thing to note here is that, while diaspora communities generally celebrate the home abroad, they also generally transfer the tensions and problems – social, inter-ethnic, inter-tribal, inter-lingual – that are found at home to the diaspora community. These may not be in the same degree as at home, but they are nevertheless present.

This chapter looks into a virtual diaspora community of Cameroonians. Focus is on how anglophone Cameroonians construct their identity as an in-group marked especially by geographical origin: coming from the English-speaking part of the country (former British colony), and the common use of English. This discursive construction takes form especially when there is need to counter the francophones – from the French-speaking part of the country. It involves invoking several aspects supposedly linked to the anglophone heritage, among them, a claim to the anglo-saxon culture (being a British ex-colony), the pride in freedom of expression, reference to pre-independence power balance and political status quo, and so forth. By doing this, they accord themselves good qualities and to the other group bad attributes. Doing this discursively confirms what Seidel (1985) says: “Discourse is a site of struggle. It is a terrain, a dynamic linguistic and, above all, semantic space in which social meanings are produced or challenged” (p. 44).

The website from which the data were collected and in which this virtual community is built is the interactive feature of The Post Newspaper Cameroon (www.postnewslines.com). In these features, Cameroonians abroad react to news stories on issues happening back in the country. Since the reactions are in English, most of the interveners are, therefore, anglophones. They generally criticise the government which they believe is too francophone-inclined, hence distancing themselves from it. They often also defend anyone, especially anglophones or anglophone-friendly people, who are treated poorly in the country or have a misfortune. I am, therefore, concerned with how this Cameroonian anglophone identity is constructed, defended, and promoted in the face of supposed ‘marginalisation’ by the francophones. The data used here is part of a larger corpus of Cameroonian online discourse from 2004 to 2008 I am building. The news stories from which the excerpts are taken were published between 2006 and 2009, and were related to politics, anglophone marginalisation and the general administration of the country.

Before going further into this, it is relevant for a better understanding of the raison d’être of such an in-group to explain the relationship between the anglophones and francophones in Cameroon. This is because this relationship, like in many diaspora situations, has been transferred abroad and is used to sanction interaction between the two groups.

The Divide: Anglophones and Francophones in Cameroon

According to Anchimbe (2006) the main factor that keeps the anglophones together as an identity group is their common use of the English language, inherited from British colonialism of the 19th and 20th centuries. Although this is not the ultimate factor or point of unity, language plays an unavoidable role in, 1) identifying the members of the group, 2) spreading the group’s values and